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AWARDS & DECORATIONS

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APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF  
THE AIR FORCE CROSS

TO

WILLIAM A. ROBINSON

Airman First Class William A. Robinson distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force as an Aircrew Member of a HH-43B helicopter over North Vietnam on 20 September 1965. On that date, Airman Robinson participated in an extremely hazardous attempted recovery of a downed pilot. This mission required a flight of over 80 miles, mostly over hostile controlled territory. Evaluation of the environment in which the downed pilot was located indicated that maximum performance would be demanded from each crew member if successful recovery was to be effected. Though exposed to intensive hostile ground fire, Airman Robinson, with complete disregard for his own safety, performed with courage and professional precision in a supreme effort to rescue a fallen comrade. Airman Robinson's courageous action and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the American fighting man under attack by an opposing armed force. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness, Airman Robinson reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.





# THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING:

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT  
THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
AUTHORIZED BY TITLE 10, SECTION 8742, UNITED STATES CODE  
HAS AWARDED

## THE AIR FORCE CROSS

TO

AIRMAN FIRST CLASS WILLIAM A. ROBINSON, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

FOR

EXTRAORDINARY HEROISM IN MILITARY OPERATIONS  
AGAINST AN OPPOSING ARMED FORCE

20 SEPTEMBER 1965

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND AND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON  
THIS 16TH DAY OF DECEMBER 1965

  
CHIEF OF STAFF



  
SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
WASHINGTON

SPECIAL ORDER  
GB-327

30 November 1965

1. DP, each of the following is awarded the Air Force Cross for extraordinary heroism while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing armed force on the dates indicated:

MAJ DEAN A PROGREBA, FR52644

5 Oct 65

CAPT THOMAS J CURTIS, FR47753

20 Sep 65

CAPT LAWRENCE T HOLLAND, FR57577

12 Jun 65

1STLT DUANE W MARTIN, FR75418

20 Sep 65

2LT ✓ A1C WILLIAM A ROBINSON, AF14782798

20 Sep 65

A3C ARTHUR N BLACK, AF12666475

20 Sep 65

2. DP, COL ROBERT T PEEL, FR2856, is awarded the Legion of Merit for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service from 1 Jan 63 to 30 Nov 65.

3. Each of the following is awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal for meritorious service during the period indicated:

LT COL EMIL W POLIVKA, FR6947

Oct 63 to 30 Nov 65

(FIRST OAK LEAF CLUSTER)

CWO (W-4) JOSEPH E BARRETT, FR953038

27 Jun 63 to 30 Nov 65

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE:



J. P. McCONNELL, General, U. S. Air Force  
Chief of Staff

R J PUGH, Colonel, USAF

Director of Administrative Services

DISTRIBUTION

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## Enlisted Heritage and the Air Force Cross

### The "Nth Degree of OJT"

By Sue Robinson

"As an early-on combat rescue force, our H-43s were somewhere between the Jolly Green Giants and, well, no rescue at all," says Bill Robinson, who spent nearly eight years of his Air Force career as a POW in North Vietnam. "Our rescue craft's 'armor plating' consisted of some quarter-inch steel plating beneath the pilot's and co-pilot's cushions and our 'long-range capability' was a 55-gallon barrel which was emptied into the fuel tank and kicked out the rear."

Recipient of more than 20 awards and decorations — including the Air Force Cross, Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star with "V" device and two Purple Hearts — Robinson describes his experience as "weeks, months and years of boredom punctuated by moments, hours and days of stark terror."

Only four enlisted men were incarcerated in North Vietnam before the heavy bombing of Hanoi in December 1972: three Air Force and one Navy. A number of B-52 tailgunners' names were then added to the "Hanoi Hilton" guest list.

Airman First Class Robinson was beginning his sixth month of "a four-month TDY" when his rescue crew received word that an F-105 pilot had been downed in enemy territory about an hour's flight from Nakhon Phanom AB, Thailand.

"We weren't allowed to get airborne until visual and radio contact was confirmed. Knowing the foe was probably on the

heels of our rescuees, this was the hardest kind of waiting for everybody," says Robinson, a guy thoroughly familiar with various forms of "waiting."

"We finally got the word and, accompanied by an armed escort, reached the unfortunate pilot waiting in the heavy jungle terrain 90 feet below. As we readied to lower the sling to an obviously relieved and grateful American Flier, our escort took enemy hits. Instructed not to 'dispose of ordnance in the local area,' they had to leave us. A decision had to be made quickly — attempt a rescue without firepower to back us up or abort. We went in."

As the pilot was being lifted to the hovering helicopter above, shots suddenly rang out and the H-43 dropped out of the sky.

"We all survived the crash because the jungle foliage cushioned our fall," remembers Robinson. "We were surrounded and captured immediately."



An H-43 "Pedro" at Nakhon Phanom AB, Thailand. Ex-POW and Air Force Cross recipient Bill Robinson, as a crewmember during a rescue mission, said, "As an early-on combat rescue force, our H-43s were somewhere between the Jolly Green Giants and, well, no rescue at all."

#### New Guy Village

"After screaming (probably obscenities) and kicking us around a bit, our captors blindfolded us and tied our hands behind our backs. We were then instructed, through the prodding of bayonets and fists, to 'git along little doggies' and began the long trek to the prison. After traveling by car, shank's mare, truck and even canoe — the latter a very tippy affair especially unappealing with one's hands and feet unavailable for swimming — we reached the part of the 'Hilton' we came to know as New Guy

SERGEANTS, May 1988



*The townspeople of Roanoke Rapids, N.C., gave then MSgt. Robinson an enthusiastic homecoming.*

#### Village."

After being "put on display" along the way to villagers who were encouraged to vent their wrath on the hapless, helpless men, the newcomers were put in solitary confinement for periods of six months to four years. No medical attention was given to their wounds, torture with ropes and other appliances resulted in partial paralysis and extremes in weather — especially with little ventilation on hot days — added to the nightmare.

"The food was no great shakes either," adds Robinson, remembering bowls with meager portions of greens and rice spiced with bugs and rat droppings.

"Some guys took longer than others to quit fasting; eventually everyone learned to ignore the crawlies — even Fred. We even dedicated a poem to this little crawly."

I don't mind finding Fred,  
The little guy in my bread.  
Unless he's quite dead.  
Or worse, half of Fred,  
The little guy in my bread.

SERGEANTS, May 1988

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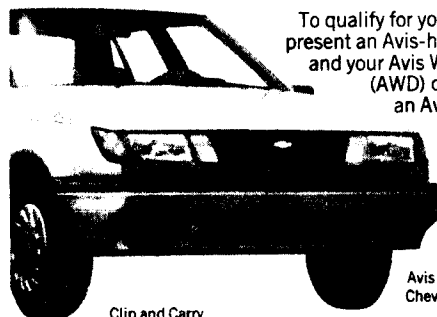
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**T**he time: July 24, 1965. Place: 23,000 feet over North Vietnam. Mission: Fly cover for aircraft bombing troop concentrations. Restrictions: Stay betweenanoi and the troop concentrations.

Force Capt. (O-3) Richard P. (Pop) Keirn, flying close formation in a flight of four F-4s, takes the first surface-to-air missile (SAM) hit of the Vietnam War. Keirn, his plane on fire and out of control, ejects and parachutes into the unknown below.

Landing in the trees but uninjured, Keirn manages to evade the enemy for more than 18 hours before he is captured and taken to the infamous Hanoi Hilton for interrogation. Later, he is moved to a "hell hole" that later would become known to its inmates as the "Zoo."

One such experience should be enough for any one person in a lifetime, but for Keirn it was POW experience number two. As a young flight officer in World War II, Keirn was shot down over Germany and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Stalag Luft 1 near Barth, Germany.

Four years passed.

The fall of 1969 found 24 POWs in Keirn's cell block. There were five other POW compounds in the camp; altogether there were more than 100 prisoners. But there were only

*William D. Hobbs is a freelance writer and a major in the Air Force Reserve.*

three enlisted men in the whole camp — all in Keirn's compound: Airman Third Class (then E-2) Arthur Black, Airman First Class (E-4) Bill Robinson and Staff Sergeant (E-5) Arthur Cormier.

From time to time, little arguments would crop up between some of the officers and one or more of the enlisted men — over baseball or football, nothing of consequence. One day this was going on and one of the officers said, "I can't argue with you. You're an enlisted man and I'm an officer." Another officer quipped: "Well, let's make 'em officers and then we can argue!"

A couple of simple, off-the-cuff statements like that set the idea for an officer candidate school in motion.

Someone asked Keirn, since he had served in World War II, if he had ever seen anyone battlefield-commissioned. He had. Someone else suggested: "Let's battlefield-commission them." The idea took hold.

Col. (later Lt. Gen.) John P. Flynn — "Sky," as he was known then — was the senior POW in the Zoo. Since he was housed in the next compound, Keirn had to communicate with him by tapping out messages on the wall, in code. Flynn endorsed the idea and battlefield-commissioned them.

Robinson says, "We assumed the role of second lieutenants and were treated as such by all the POWs. Needless to say, our morale shot up to new heights."

One might wonder why it was unanimously decided that the

the cells of North Vietnam's "Zoo" prison camp, American POWs conducted their own officer candidate school for the only three enlisted men in the camp. The three, Air

Force sergeants at the time, are now captains: (from left) Bill Robinson, Arthur Cormier, Arthur Black. (AF and DoD photos) They were commissioned by the senior POW in the camp.

three men were officer material. Black and Cormier were both pararescuemen. Black was a high school graduate with less than a year of college. Cormier was a high school graduate and had 45 semester hours of college. Robinson, a helicopter crew chief, had graduated from high school. All had been aboard helicopters that were shot down.

"It's hard to put into words what they did to make us believe they would make good officers," Keirn says. "Their conduct in prison was as good as any officer there and better than some. They supported the officers over them to the best of their ability. They took orders without question. They did more than their share of the work. They helped anyone who was injured or sick and tried to do their best to make things work for everybody."

Keirn suggested they they start a school for the new officers so that when they got back to the States, Air Force authorities would not question the validity of the commissioning. The three enlisted men didn't think the whole thing would work, but they went along with it just to have something to do. No one thought it would be a waste of time to have the school; instructing Black, Robinson and Cormier would give the others something to do, too.

All the officers offered to help in any way they could. The ones who did the actual training were 1st Lt. (now Lt. Col.) Thomas Browning, 1st Lt. (now Lt. Col.) John Borling, and Navy Lt. (jg) (now Cmdr.) David Carey. Browning and Borling were graduates of the Air Force Academy and Carey was a graduate of the Naval Academy. They gave the three men the benefit of everything they had learned.

The teachers and the students went to work: customs and courtesies of the service; the structure of military command, supply and intelligence, and how these things should work together to make a viable military outfit. They conducted courses in math, psychology, writing and grammar. They used any kind of material that was available, such as toilet paper and pencil stubs.

Sometimes, the three students were given one day to prepare for a 15-minute speech on a certain subject. Another time, they were given a subject and only two minutes to prepare a five-minute speech. The instructors gave them math problems, navigation — just about anything that could be studied and questioned. This continued for four hours a day, six days a week, for about four months.

And not one of the men "slacked" in his homework.

The treatment of the Americans seemed to change with the political climate. Early in their captivity, most of the torture came in the form of beatings, solitary confinement, starvation and humiliation.

But by 1970, when this officer training was going on, the North Vietnamese had slacked off on this kind of treatment; the starvation diet had been improved. The food they were getting was adequate for exercising, running in place, playing volleyball or some basketball. And both instructors and students were better able to concentrate.

The policy in most wars has been to separate the officers from the enlisted men. But in this case, there were only three enlisted men. Keirn believes the North Vietnamese thought it wasn't worth the trouble to separate them.

Flynn suggests another idea: "The NV treated us as the blackest of criminals, never recognizing us as prisoners of war. Since they considered us criminals, there was no separation of the enlisted men from the officers. For them to do so

would have indicated that they did consider us POWs and were following accepted procedure."

Either way, the NV inadvertently paved the way for this OCS behind bars.

Ironically, the NV did recognize that the American "criminals" had military rank. They posted signs stating that junior officers would be imprisoned for at least seven years; majors and lieutenant colonels would have to stay for 12 to 14 years; and colonels and above would never see their families again. Theoretically, commissioning the three airmen could have meant the NV would increase their sentence — had they known what was going on.

In February 1973, freedom came.

For years, Air Force policymakers have been hung up on the notion that all officers should have degrees. Would they honor the battlefield commissions?

John Flynn was uncertain of his authority to bestow a battlefield commission. He had been promoted to brigadier general while he was in prison, but the information had been withheld from the public for two reasons. If the North Vietnamese had found out about the promotion, it could have meant harsher treatment. Second, officials wanted to see whether Flynn was mentally capable before they pinned on a star.

Wasting no time, Flynn went directly to then-Secretary of the Air Force John L. McLucas. He told McLucas the story behind the battlefield commissioning. To some people's surprise, McLucas enthusiastically supported it. The only thing he wouldn't go along with was making the commissions retroactive to the date of the commissionings in prison. Considering the time-in-grade factor, that would have made them first lieutenants well on their way to being considered for promotion to captain.

"I think it's important to note," says General Flynn, "that bestowing a battlefield commission on a deserving enlisted man improves the spirit and morale of the enlisted force. I never made the mistake of believing all officers are smarter than all enlisted men."

#### WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

All three men are captains. Because of his enlisted experience in the field, Bill Robinson went into aircraft maintenance and today is an aircraft maintenance officer with the 33rd Component Repair Squadron at Eglin AFB, Fla.

Arthur Black went through pilot training and flew HC-130s for a year and a half. Today he is a T-37 instructor pilot at Mather AFB, Calif.

Arthur Cormier, the "old man" of the trio, has had a most unusual career. Cormier actually had gone to Air Force OCS back in 1960, but had not completed the course. When released from prison on Feb. 12, 1973, he had close to 20 years' service. On official Air Force records, he had been promoted to senior master sergeant (E-8) and had a line number for chief master sergeant (E-9).

With the approval of the Secretary of the Air Force, Cormier waited until he was promoted to chief master sergeant before accepting his commission. That way, if he retired before 10 years' commissioned service, he would be able to retire at his highest enlisted grade. When Cormier did accept a commission, he was given the same time-in-grade as Black and Robinson, who were commissioned earlier. Today, he is a fuels management officer at RAF Mildenhall in England. ||



VIỆT NAM  
DÂN CHỦ CỘNG HÒA



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ĐI BÀN ROY KHI MIỀN BẮC



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After his capture in 1965, Robinson was photographed by the enemy on his way to the "Hanoi Hilton." A postage stamp was later made by the North Vietnamese from the photo to commemorate the shootdown of the 2,000th American aircraft. "Odd," quips Robinson, "the Vietnamese claim to have downed 4,100 F-105s when only 800 were actually built."

Often, camp guards would tease a prisoner confined to his pallet bed in leg irons. They'd place his food on the floor and take great pleasure in his hunger as he watched the rats feasting"

Food—or the lack of it—was a subject always on the minds of the cell dwellers. "our usual menu was a cup of rice for breakfast, a cup of water for lunch and 'swell up' for supper," jokes Robinson.

Back home in North Carolina, Robinson's family was informed of his MIA status when they found a telegram slipped under the door. Three years passed before they knew he was, officially, a POW.

Released February 12, 1973—2,703 days after his September 20, 1965 shootdown—MSgt. Robinson flew on the first plane out to Clark AB, Philippines, for initial medical evaluation and was then hospitalized at Andrews AFB, Md.

## First Thing's First

With a line number for E-8, upon his homecoming, Robinson and two other enlisted ex-POWs were offered a direct presidential appointment to the rank of second lieutenant. Based on the recommendations of the senior ranking officer, Gen. John Flynn and other inmates, and after receiving "informal" Officer Candidate School training during his incarceration, he accepted.

"I figured it would be easier to fill a 'second louie's' shoes than those of senior master sergeant," he says.

Medically retired in 1984 as a captain, the former captive now makes his home on a Northwest Florida horse farm.

"Because our horse ranch doubles as a rehabilitation sanctuary for injured or motherless wildlife, the lifestyle is anything but a rut. It's very satisfying to aid needy creatures and

release them back to their native habitats in better shape than ever before," comments the empathetic animal lover. "Believe it or not, I have even learned to bottle feed baby rats."

Robinson is often asked to speak of his experience to civil organizations and high schools. "During a recent question answer session, a teenage girl in the back of the classroom raised her hand and queried, 'What's the first thing you wanted to do when you got home?' When the laughter finally died down, I replied that my special cravings were ice cream and fresh vegetables."



At 44, Robinson is enjoying his retirement. With his sense of humor intact, he shrugs and smiles as he remembers the years of misery.

"As one of only two POWs in the North who never attended survival school, I suppose you could say I experienced the Nth degree of OJT."

**Editor's Note:** Sue Robinson is the wife of Air Force Cross recipient Bill Robinson, she is also a freelance writer.

# Former POW donates medals to

by FAYE COBB

William A. Robinson, Capt. USAF retired, one of the first recipients of the Air Force Cross and a former prisoner of war in Vietnam said concerning Heritage Hall at Gunter Air Force Station in Montgomery, Alabama, "I think it is quite an important step because I believe it is really the backbone of the military; the strength that we stand on is the enlisted force. Unfortunately, its history has been neglected and it's important at this time that we pick up as many pieces from the past and incorporate them into the present so we can share them with the future."

Robinson's Air Force Cross, second in valor only to the Congressional Medal of Honor, will soon be displayed along with other memorabilia in Heritage Hall, a museum-like facility, that tells the history of Air Force enlisted personnel and their contributions in the development of air power. The facility will be open to civilians in March.

According to Chief Master Sgt. Wayne L. Fisk, Heritage Hall was established in 1984 and rededicated in March, 1986. Designed chronologically, the museum unfurls enlisted man's history from early days of ballooning to the end of the Vietnam War.

A pictorial exhibit includes photographs dating back to the 1800s, some illustrating the earliest use of balloons used to observe enemy locations during the Civil War.

The stroll through history brings to reality the bad with the good. As airplanes took to

the skyways, fatalities occurred. The collection contains a photograph of Cpl. Frank Scott, the first enlisted man to lose his life in an air accident. He died in College Park, Maryland on September 28, 1943. Scott Air Force Base in Illinois is the only Air Force base to bear the name of an enlisted man. Scott is remembered for his - and others - heroic contribution to aerial flight.

The museum's World War I section features the use of both balloons and airplanes with artifacts from both; tether ropes, early telephones, Jenny wicker seats, wing center struts and personal flying gear depict the enlisted pilots roles. The World War I era also features a pictorial exhibit of Cpl. Eugene Bullard's military career as the world's first black fighter pilot. Pvt. Frederick Libby is remembered as the first American Ace. The exhibit is also divided into European and Pacific-Far East theaters with unique and interesting artifacts such as a rare B-32 overhead gun turret.

The history moves on through displays of World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam.

"The real message we'd like to get out," said Robinson, "is to encourage people - if they have any information about enlisted history, any uniforms, artifacts or anything that pertains to enlisted airmen - to contact Chief Master Sgt. Wayne Fisk and offer him any assistance they can in obtaining these items so he can

incorporate them - or their knowledge and Air Force history - into the ongoing pro-

gram there." Fisk's address is USAF Enlisted Heritage Hall, Building 1210, Gunter AFS,

AL 36114-5732.

According to Fisk, Heritage Hall is presently in Phase II of a three-phase program. Phase III will entail a three million dollar fund raising campaign for the purpose of building a new and permanent Heritage Hall facility; it will begin in two to three years.

Robinson's Air Force Cross will serve to remind visitors to Heritage Hall of the courage and valor displayed by so many who fought and served in our country's wars.

Robinson said he was a sergeant and a helicopter crew chief when captured by the enemy in 1965 and imprisoned in Hanoi for seven and a half years. Upon release, he made master sergeant and later one of three to receive the rank of 2nd lieutenant. He said he spent twelve years in the military as an enlisted man and twelve commissioned.

Robinson said although he was awarded the Air Force Cross in 1965, his ceremony and presentation was not until 1973 when he returned from Vietnam.

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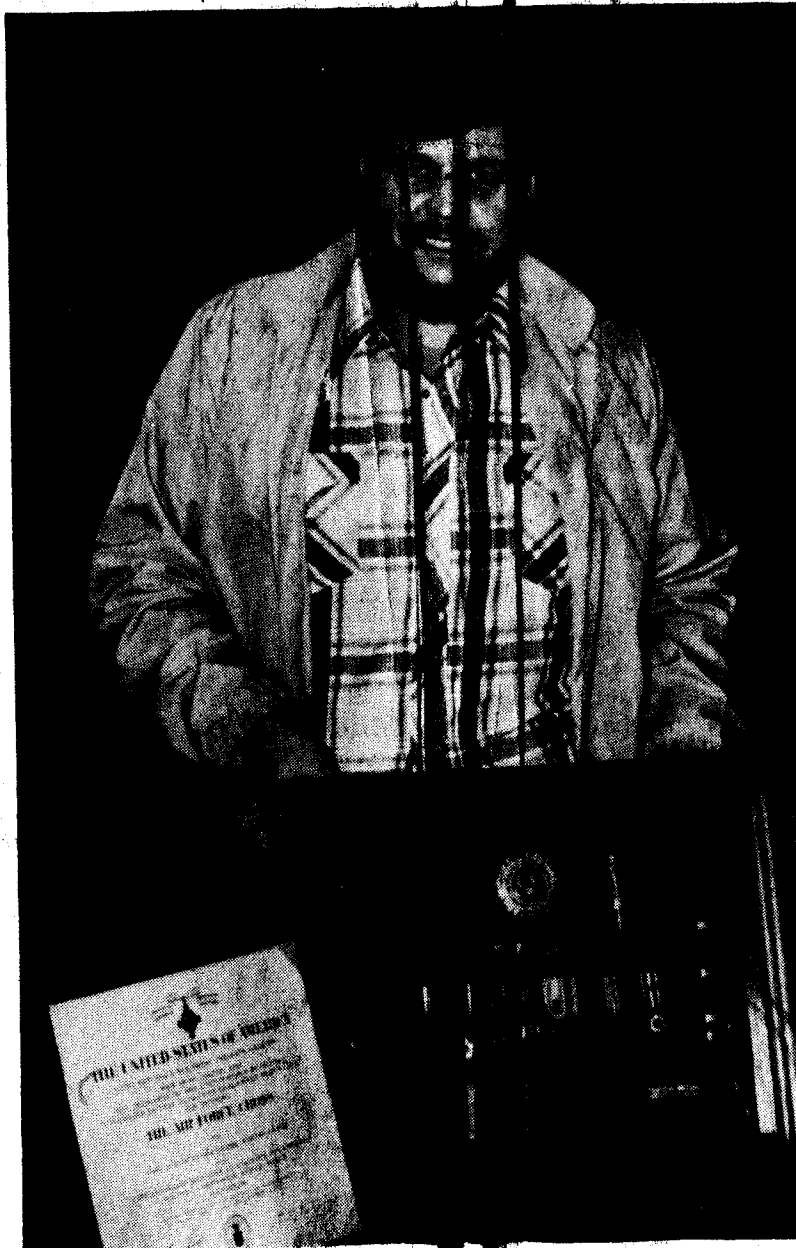
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Robinson said receiving the medal made him feel as though someone weighed the situation and felt he had made the right decision-even though they were unsuccessful in the rescue attempt-and that they did everything possible to fulfill their mission.

The museum displays many artifacts depicting the diversified roles of the USAF airmen in Vietnam including a POW uniform emphasizing the personal sacrifices made by airmen like "Bill" Robinson.

Among other interesting exhibitions, stands Heritage Hall's salute to former airmen who achieve fame in civilian careers. These include Johnny Cash, Mel Tillis, former Governor George Wallace, Charlton Heston, Chuck Yeager, astronaut Dick Scobee, Flip Wilson and Chuck Norris.

A floor to ceiling American flag draped in a concave salutes the Army Air Corps and Air Force Medal of Honor recipients. The words Preserve, Protect and Defend remind visitors to Heritage Hall of Freedom's price.



WILLIAM ROBINSON shown with medal donated to Heritage Hall.

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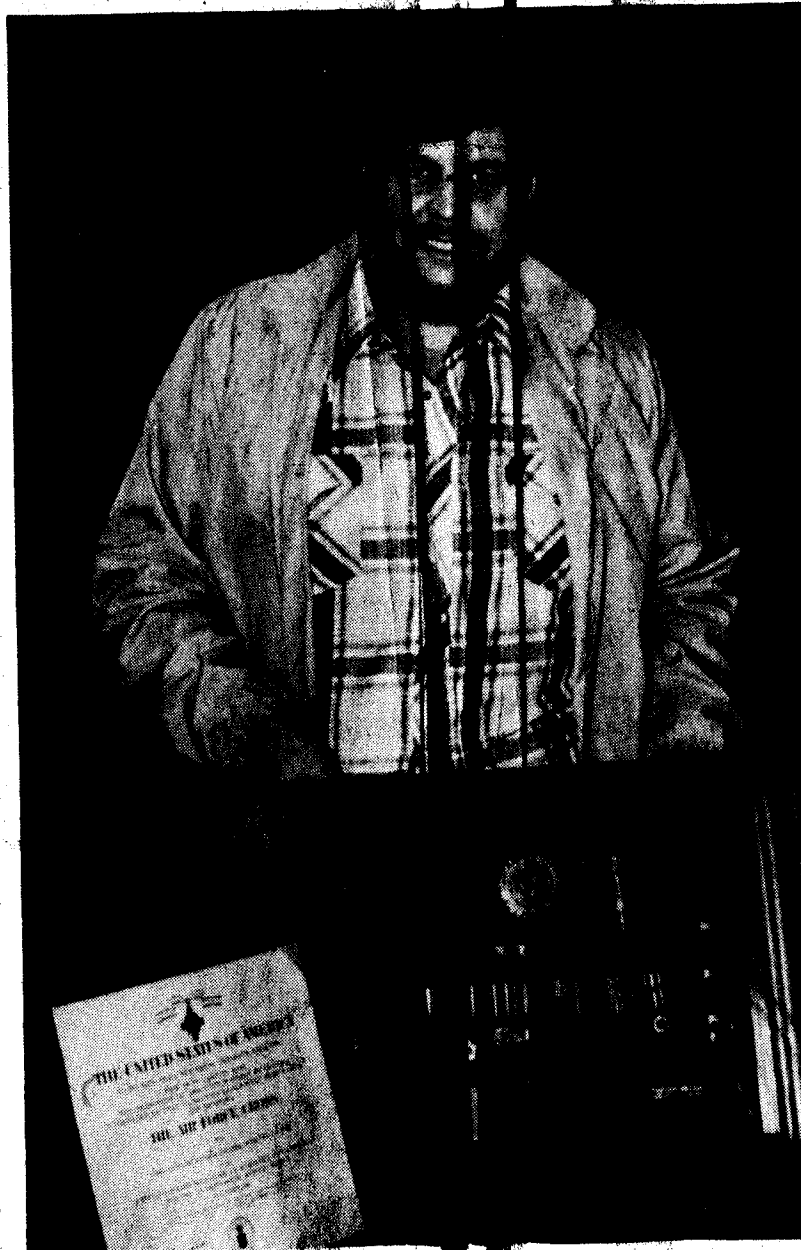
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Robinson said receiving the medal made him feel as though someone weighed the situation and felt he had made the right decision-even though they were unsuccessful in the rescue attempt-and that they did everything possible to fulfill their mission.

The museum displays many artifacts depicting the diversified roles of the USAF airmen in Vietnam including a POW uniform emphasizing the personal sacrifices made by airmen like "Bill" Robinson.

Among other interesting exhibitions, stands Heritage Hall's salute to former airmen who achieve fame in civilian careers. These include Johnny Cash, Mel Tillis, former Governor George Wallace, Charlton Heston, Chuck Yeager, astronaut Dick Scobee, Flip Wilson and Chuck Norris.

A floor to ceiling American flag draped in a concave salutes the Army Air Corps and Air Force Medal of Honor recipients. The words Preserve, Protect and Defend remind visitors to Heritage Hall of Freedom's price.